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ABSTRACT

Anthropology as an academic discipline in the United States experienced an explosive growth during the late 1960's and early 1970's, when the Woodstock generation embraced anthropology. However, interest in anthropology as a discipline declined in the late 1970's and early 1980's, when the new work-oriented generation held anthropologists at arms length. Anthropologists must change and adapt by applying the basic characteristics of anthropology to themselves: holism, cultural relativism, and participant observation. For example, anthropologists have been preoccupied with studying non-modern societies. One of the larger societies that needs to be studied from a holistic perspective is the U.S. academic socio-cultural system. The discipline's health depends on anthropologists' knowing the nature of the environment to which they need to adapt. In spite of their commitment to cultural relativism, anthropologists make negative judgments about practices of American society. They need to respect and become knowledgeable about their own culture. Studying U.S. culture with the commitment of a participant observation approach, which involves emphatic identification of the analyzer with the person(s) being analyzed, should make anthropologists less escapist and more like the people they interact with on a daily basis. (RM)

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS*

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SO 015 567

*Paper to be presented at the 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, November 16-20, 1983, Chicago, Illinois

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as an academic discipline in the United States experienced an explosive growth during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. This growth is visually noticeable by looking at the thickness of the editions of the Guide to Departments of Anthropology, starting with the 1st edition for the year 1962-63. The next four editions are about the same thickness as the 1st edition. The 5th edition, however, is much thicker than the 1st, containing 123 pages instead of 44; listing 101 departments instead of 44; and, containing the names of 1494 anthropologists instead of 521.

The long-term growth rate for physical science has been one of doubling in size every 10 to 15 years for the past three centuries (Price 1963). According to Rogge (1976: 830), anthropology has also grown at a similar rate with a doubling period every 13 years, or a 6% growth rate per year. But if the editions of the Guide are a reliable indicator of growth, then anthropology experienced a doubling in size in only 5 years, 1962-67, with most of that growth coming in the fifth year.

If we use the increase in number of departments listed in the Guide as an indicator of growth for the years of 1968 to the present, then, anthropology had a growth rate of more than the expected 6% a year until 1973. After 1973, the trend is one of less than the expected 6% growth rate with two Guides reporting no growth at all (1976-77, 1978-79), and one Guide reporting a drop in the listings of academic departments and museums (1974-75).

Based on the above figures, two questions are worth asking and trying to answer: (1) Why did anthropology grow much faster than expected for

about ten years? (2) Why has anthropology grown slower than expected for about the last ten years?

To answer the first question we need to look at what was taking place in our nation during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This period of time is different from any other comparable period of time in our nation's history in terms of cultural upheaval. The Viet Nam War and the Black Movement were linked with what Zinn (1973: 36) has characterized as tumultous conflict, agonizing disillusionment, and a movement for change.

Young people rebelled against authority, and some of them showed their independence of spirit by leaving their families, home towns, and schools. These young people formed a counterculture to their own affluent white middle class origins and became hippies and members of the Woodstock generation.

The Woodstock generation found behavioral sciences, the so-called soft sciences, more appealing to them than the "hard" sciences. American Indians, favorite subjects of anthropology, were "cool" or "in" people to study about. A career in business, on the other hand, was tainted because of possible links to the military-industrial complex.

By the mid 1970s, though, the situation began to change. The conflict generated by the Viet Nam War stopped almost as soon as the war ended in the Spring of 1975. Less affluent times and fewer job openings for college graduates became a long-term trend, extending into the 1980s. College students adapted to this trend by trying to make themselves more marketable for the declining number of suitable jobs that existed. In the process, alienation from white middle class values has been replaced with conforming behavior. The hard science courses that lead to jobs are in demand and

enrollment in business-related courses is up. Unfortunately for anthropology, enrollment in the behavioral sciences is down. Anthropology's fortunes in the last twenty years appear to be tied to two contrasting generations: the Woodstock generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, our period of explosive growth, and the Marketable generation (Newsweek 1982) of the late 1970s and early 1980s when our growth came to an end and retrenchment set in. The balance of this paper will discuss in more detail why the Woodstock generation embraced us while the Marketable generation holds us at armlength. In the process, three basic characteristics of anthropology will be presented and how our failure to apply them to curselves has contributed to our current problems.

HOLISM

The holistic urge is what Kroeber (1959: 400) thought was most distinctive of anthropologists as a group. We have continued since his day to address mankind as a whole. There are at least two reasons for our holistic emphasis. First, we have always studied small non-modern societies that no other discipline was interested in studying. A holistic approach seemed to be an appropriate one for such societies.

However, there are fewer and fewer small non-modern societies left in the world today to study. Unfortunately, our preoccupation with such societies has left us without much experience in using a holistic approach on the larger societal units that are out there to be studied.

One of these larger societal units that we need to study from a holistic perspective is the academic socio-cultural system in the United States. Our health as a discipline, even our very existence, depends on our knowing

the nature of the environment to which we need to adapt: the sub-culture of academia within the larger culture of the United States. This is where we live, except for brief field trips elsewhere. Yet, most of us have done more holistic analyses of non-western groups of people than we have of our own situation.

A second reason for our holistic emphasis in anthropology is that we are people with broad ranging interests. A departmental colleague of mine was advised by her academic counselor to go into anthropology because she could not narrow down her interests to just one field of study. This breadth of coverage in anthropology is appealing to the lay public and Margaret Mead used it with an easy-to-read style to popularize anthropology. She realized the importance of writing for the public as well as for the scholarly world. With her death we lost our most powerful argument against the public stereotype that all anthropologists are archeologists.

That stereotype is damaging to our discipline when held by prospective students, their parents, or state legislators. We have not written for them to correct this stereotype because we thought it was more important to publish for our peers or we would perish.

It may be time to re-evaluate the publish or perish syndrome because we have published and we are headed toward extinction as a discipline. The student support that we need to justify our existence may have eroded away because we are not communicating with the public, or even academia, in a holistic way.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

This belief, that no custom is right or wrong in and of itself, but each

must be viewed in context, is regarded by many as anthropology's most significant contribution to humanist thinking (Plog and Bates 1976: 69). Cultural relativism, like holism, is related to the study of small non-modern societies. Most anthropologists would probably agree that it is a useful value position to hold when initiating study on any societal group, small or large.

Cultural relativism has enabled us to take a nonjudgmental approach toward the non-modern societies we have studied. It has not enabled us, though, to be nonjudgmental toward our own academic culture or the larger American culture. We are critical of both cultures.

We find distasteful the elitist emphasis of the scholarly world and try to dress, talk, and act in such a way that we are not mistaken for academicians. Our dress is casual with some of us wearing blue collar clothes to class, shoes unshined, hair uncut. Most of us are not polished speakers, depending on notes to give our lectures. We are slightly uncomfortable in the classroom and even more so in faculty meetings, on university committees, and in politicking within the university (Cohn 1962: 26). We prefer to spend our energies in doing fieldwork rather than completely participating in the academic community, even though help in a budget crunch is more likely to come from that community than from the people we study.

It is not surprising that as members of a community of scholars, we hold values that are different from those of Americans outside of academia. What is surprising about us is that, in spite of our commitment to cultural relativism, we make negative value judgments about core institutions and practices of American society. Cultural relativism enables us to write

sympathetic descriptions of the religions and shamans of non-western people, but it does not keep us from sneering at Southern Baptists and Billy Graham (Stipe 1980: 168). Cultural relativism also helps us to appreciate the creation myths of American Indians, who don't pay our salaries, while we do battle over the Biblical account of creation with segments of the American public, who do pay our salaries.

It is ironic for us that the concept of cultural relativism encourages sensitivity and respect for every culture but our own. Because we do not respect our own culture, we are not very knowledgeable about it in an analytical sense.

We need to consciously know what the core values of mainstream American culture are so that we can relate to them and survive. We also need to realize that our explosive growth took place during an unusual period of time in our nation's history, not likely to be repeated in our lifetime. Even at that, the counterculture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s only affected a small percentage of our population and those effects were short-lived. Things are back to normal now.

What is normal about our culture is an enduring commitment to pragmatism, with only the useful considered as valuable. Students in the 1980s want to know from us how what we teach will help them get jobs. Our class enrollment figures will probably not go up until we can give a satisfactory answer to that question.

The question of jobs may seem unfair to ask of teachers in a department usually located in a college of Liberal Arts, a college with a humanistic emphasis. However, these colleges are often part of land-grant universities that were founded for regional usefulness and contemporary relevance. Nor

do humanism and pragmatism have to be irreconciliable concepts. Anthropology has always had a foot outside of the universities (Moore 1983: 8). But applied, or useful anthropology has never enjoyed the prestige of theoretical or academic anthropology. Yet, this preoccupation with theoretical anthropology has resulted in our being taken to task by an American Indian social scientist. He claims that such studies of his people have resulted in "useless knowledge for knowledge's sake." (DeLoria 1973: 136).

Our lack of concern for applied anthropology is indicated by our code of ethics. One practicing anthropologist considers the code to be totally irrelevant to her because of its almost exclusive academic orientation. That same orientation makes an applied anthropologist a violater of the code by doing research for a private employer under the customary assignment agreements (Nelson 1983: 10).

We need an academic orientation for our discipline to be respectable in universities but we also need an applied emphasis to fit in with the pragmatism of our society. The writers of our code of ethics evidently did not think that applied anthropology is of much importance to our discipline's future. But since anthropology is not considered by universities to be core, professional, or high technology, students electing to take our courses will do so to the extent that those courses make them more marketable. Courses in applied anthropology are more likely to contribute to the marketability of students than courses in academic anthropology.

Participant-Observation

The last basic characteristic of anthropology to be discussed is the method of participant-observation. This method involves an emphatic identification of the analyzer with who is being analyzed. Participant-

observation reduces the gulf between us and the people we study. We become more like them so that we can understand them better.

It has been relatively easy for us to identify with the people we study but difficult for us to identify with academicians or the American public. We may have deep-seated psychological problems that will have to be dealt with before we can participate adequately in our own culture. Perhaps, as an English professor friend of mine suggests, anthropologists are escapists who, in their flight from the unpleasantness of contemporary society, find refuge in studying societies far removed from local problems (Christie 1983). If his assessment is accurate, studying our culture with the commitment of a participant-observation approach should make us less escapist and more like the people we interact with on a daily basis.

Like so many tribal groups that we study who are also members of a nation, we belong to two cultures. Tribal people manage to function biculturally, even though the values of the tribe may clash with those of the nation. As anthropologists, we ought to be sophisticated enough to do the same. This means that in the academic world, we talk, look, and act like academicians, publishing scholarly works so that we do not perish as individuals. It also means that outside of academia, we talk, look, and act like the public, publishing popular works so that our discipline does not become extinct.

Summary

The reason why we have the highest percentage of unemployed Phds in the 1980s of all major fields (Anthropology Newsletter 1983: 4) is because the times have changed and we have not. The old counterculture generation

responsible for our sudden growth is gone, probably for good, replaced by a new marketable generation. Students today have little patience for classes taught by professors alienated from the society that will provide them with jobs.

I suggest we change with the times and adapt to the contemporary situation. We can do this by using the basic characteristics of anthropology on ourselves: holism, cultural relativism, and participant-observation. I can think of no more important group of people for us to study.

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